DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 430 UD 032 488

AUTHOR Shokraii, Nina H.; Olson, Christine L.; Youssef, Sarah
TITLE A Comparison of Public and Private Education in the District of Columbia. F.Y.I., 148.
INSTITUTION Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1997-09-17
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Educational Finance; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Federal Legislation; *Private Schools; *Public Schools; Racial Composition; Resource Allocation; Scholarships; School Choice; *School Safety; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *District of Columbia; District of Columbia Public Schools

ABSTRACT

Two separate systems of education exist in the District of Columbia. In the private school system, students from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds are learning the basic skills and more, and are going on to college at high rates. In the public school system, the majority of students are consigned to deteriorating and dangerous schools in which they are not taught the skills they need to succeed in school, and academic achievement is poor. Only 53% of the students entering the District's public high schools in the ninth grade remained in the system to graduate 4 years later. Most either dropped out or left to attend other schools. In 1995, 17% of students in the District of Columbia attended private schools (including the Catholic schools). About as many black students as white attended the private schools citywide. The private schools, particularly the Catholic schools, report greater school safety, with far fewer episodes of violence. Only a little more than 50% of the public school budget goes to instruction, while the Catholic schools in the District allocate 62% of their budgets to instruction. (Contains 12 charts and 1 table.) (SLD)

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214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400
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The Heritage Foundation

F.Y.I.

No. 148
September 17, 1997

ED 422 430

A COMPARISON OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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Nina H. Shokraii
Policy Analyst

Christine L. Olson
Policy Analyst

Sarah Youssef
Research Assistant

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Two separate and very unequal systems of education exist in the District of Columbia. In one, children from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds are learning the basic skills and more, and are going on to college at high rates. The other system consigns the majority of its students to deteriorating and dangerous schools in which the education establishment has failed to teach most of them the skills they will need to succeed in school, let alone get into college. Despite numerous reforms and massive spending, the District of Columbia public schools (DCPS) have failed to improve their record, relegating thousands of students to a system that lags behind the generally more efficient private school system.

Congress soon will debate several measures designed to address this education crisis, including legislation that would offer educational opportunities to 60,000 eligible D.C. students. Under the District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997, for example, 2,000 low-income students would receive scholarships to attend the public or private school of their choice.[1] The need for such scholarships and other education reforms became starkly apparent last year when the District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority[2] (known as the D.C. Financial Control Board) released a report on the state of the D.C. public schools. In this

1 The District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997, introduced by Representatives Richard Armey (R–TX), William Lipinski (D–IL), and Floyd Flake (D–NY) and Senators Dan Coats (R–IN), Joseph Lieberman (D–CT), and Sam Brownback (R–KS), would give vouchers to 2,000 of the District's poorest students to attend a school of their choice in the D.C. metropolitan area.

2 The authority was created by Congress in 1995 to address the financial and management difficulties of the District of Columbia.

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

UD032488

Social Science Confirms Positive Effects of School Choice on Public Schools

Caroline M. Hoxby, an economist at Harvard, studied the effectiveness of school choice programs using five different national surveys ("Do Private Schools Provide Competition for Public Schools?" National Bureau of Economic Research *Working Paper* No. 4978, 1994.). She found that competition from Catholic schools increased academic achievement at both public and private schools. Specifically, Hoxby examined the "effects of inter-school competition on public schools [based on] the availability and costs of private school alternatives to public schools." Her research showed that greater private school competitiveness raises the academic quality of public schools, wages, and high school graduation rates of public school students. In addition, her study found that public schools react to this competition by increasing their teachers' salaries. Through choice, Hoxby concluded, students in both public and private schools would increase the amount of time they spent in school by about two years while their math and reading test scores would improve by about 10 percent. She also estimated their subsequent wages would increase by 14 percent.

report, the Control Board warned that the "longer students stay in the District's public school system, the less likely they are to succeed."[3]

Reports from numerous sources underscore this gloomy assessment. On average, D.C. students perform far worse than all other students at the national level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam.[4] The $7,300-per-student school system has been so fraught with mismanagement and corruption that last November the Control Board took over its operation and dismantled the 11-member D.C. school board, taking away its power over budgets and policy and electing retired Army Lieutenant General Julius Becton, Jr., as superintendent.

As General Becton and the D.C. Emergency Transitional School Board struggle to find solutions to the District's problems, a look at D.C.'s approximately 90 nongovernment schools offers guidance for reform efforts. Comparisons (to the extent possible) between public and private schools in the District are instructive. For the following comparison, when local data are not available, national data are used. It is important to note that this study addresses only *categories* of schools in the District, not individual schools. Several public schools have outstanding achievement records, and not every private school outperforms the public schools.

Demographics of D.C. Schools

	Center-City Catholic	Public
White	0.50%	4%
Black	93%	88%
Hispanic	5%	6.60%
Asian	0.30%	1.30%

Sources: U.S. Department of Education; Archdiocese of Greater Washington.

The following points clarify the condition of private and public school education in the District of Columbia. In each case, the most recent available data are used.[5]

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3 *Children in Crisis: Foundation for the Future*, District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority, November 1996, available on the Internet at *http://www.nubian.com/dcfra/newinfo/edreform3.html*.

4 See U.S. Department of Education, *NAEP 1996 Science Report Card for the Nations and the States*, May 1997, pp. 25, 56, and *NAEP 1996 Mathematics Report Card for the Nations and the States*, February 1997, pp. 28, 30.

5 In certain cases, earlier data were used in order to develop consistency in comparisons.

PRIVATE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

According to information furnished by the most recent census, the D.C. public schools, and the Archdiocese of Greater Metropolitan Washington:

- In 1995, more students attended private schools than at any time since 1986. Over 15,000 students—**17 percent** of school-age children in the District—attended private schools that year.[6]
- During the 1994–1995 school year, about the same number of black students attended private schools as white students citywide.[7]
- According to the most recent census, private school attendance is highest in the District's third ward, in which students score the highest on DCPS standardized tests. (See Chart 1.)
- In Ward 8, in which the poverty rate tops 25 percent, at least **10 percent** of the student population attends private schools. (See Charts 1 and 2 and Table 1.)

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS[8]

In the most recent round of DCPS testing, during the 1996–1997 school year (see Chart 3),

- **33 percent** of third graders scored below the basic level in reading and math;
- **29 percent** of eighth graders scored below basic in reading; and
- **72 percent** of eighth graders scored below basic in math.

(On these tests, students can score "below basic," "basic," "proficient," or "advanced." A score of "proficient" signifies that the student is performing at grade level.)

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the District of Columbia consistently scores last behind all participating states. Furthermore:

- **80 percent** of DCPS students in fourth grade ranked below the basic math achievement levels in 1996 (see Chart 4);
- **78 percent** of DCPS fourth graders ranked below the basic reading achievement levels—nearly twice as low as the national average—in 1994 (see Chart 5); and
- Only **53 percent** of the students entering D.C. high schools in ninth grade remained in the system to graduate four years later. Overall, **40 percent** of the city's high school students dropped out or left the District's schools to attend other schools.

Evidence of the cumulative effect of ineffective schools is found in the amount of remedial education required to bring D.C. public school graduates up to speed when they enter college. In the late 1970s, officials from the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) reported that it took one year of remedial work to do this. Now, according to the D.C. city government and the UDC, the average time required is about two years.[9]

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6 Based on DCPS Dropout and Migrations Statistics (1991–1995).

7 *Indices: A Statistical Index to District of Columbia Services*, 1994–1996, Office of Planning and Evaluation, Government of the District of Columbia, p. 246.

8 To protect the privacy of their students, the majority of D.C. private schools were unwilling to release test scores; thus, the authors are unable to provide test score comparisons.

9 Valerie Strauss and Sari Horwitz, "Students Caught in a Cycle of Failure," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1997, p. A1.

How School Choice Benefits Milwaukee Public Schools

The following are excerpts from the affidavit of John Gardner, at-large member of the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and American Civil Liberties Union, on the positive effects of the Milwaukee school choice program on the city's public schools. (Mr. Gardner submitted this affidavit on September 12, 1996, in defense of the Milwaukee School Choice Program in *Warner Jackson, et al. vs. John T. Benson, et al. and Parents for School Choice, et al.*, No. 95–CV–1982, and *Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, et al. vs. John T. Benson, et al. and Parents for School Choice, et al.*, No. 95–CV–1997.)

My involvement with Milwaukee Public Schools—as a member of the school board, as a parent, and as an active and concerned citizen—has persuaded me that MPS's internal reforms require the sustained challenge and competition of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. The program also puts effective pressure on MPS to expand, accelerate, and improve reforms long deliberated and too-long postponed. The following examples demonstrate MPS's responsiveness to the needs and requests of our low-income minority families during 1995–96:

- MPS has, at long last, approved its first charter school.
- MPS authorized three small, innovative high schools initiated by MPS teachers.
- We approved our third Montessori school, after more than a decade of long waiting lists [of students that want] to enter our two highly successful MPS Montessori schools.
- Low-income MPS parents have long complained about the unpredictable continuity for their children, and are especially disadvantaged by racial and geographic restrictions from entering MPS's most popular schools in the lottery random selection process. We increased educational continuity at five schools.
- In an historic action, the MPS board voted to close six schools we identified as failing and to reconstitute these schools' administrations and faculties.
- We have expanded our use of partnership schools.
- We authorized two elementary schools to contract for expanded classroom space.
- We have contracted with two religiously affiliated, non-sectarian schools for exceptional education students.

I believe that the challenge and competition provided by the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program for exemplary educational standards, and options for state-aid dollars, made the critical difference in instituting these long-overdue reforms during the 1995–96 school year.

NATIONAL COMPARISONS TO CATHOLIC INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

Many studies have found that the poorest students in the country's inner cities perform better in Catholic schools.[10] For example, **23 percent** of eighth graders from the poorest families who attend public schools across the country perform below basic levels in reading, compared with **11.2 percent** of poor students in Catholic schools. (See Chart 6.)

STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Various surveys of students and teachers present drastic differences in the environments of public and private schools. For example:

- **16 percent** of students in the District's public schools have reported carrying a weapon into school; **11 percent** avoid school because they fear for their safety. By contrast, during the 1996–1997 school year, D.C. Catholic schools reported only one instance of a weapon at school and only one drug incident. No serious violence was reported.[11] (See Chart 7.)
- Despite a high level of violence during the 1992–1993 school year, the DCPS reported expelling students at a rate of only 24 per 1,000 pupils, far below the urban school average of 114. In D.C. Catholic schools, only 2 children were expelled.
- **19 percent** of D.C. public school teachers report verbal abuse as a serious problem, as opposed to **17 percent** of public school teachers in central cities nationwide and a mere **1.8 percent** of private school teachers in central cities nationwide. (See Chart 8.)

BUDGETS AND BUREAUCRACY

According to data on public and private school budgets and administrative costs from the Archdiocese of Greater Metropolitan Washington and the D.C. public schools:

- The District has only 16 teachers per administrator, compared with the national average of 42. Catholic schools in the District fund 255 teachers for every administrator. (See Chart 9.)
- Only a little more than **50 percent** of the District's education expenditures goes toward instruction, while the rest of the country spends **62 percent.** (See Chart 10.) Catholic schools in the District allocate more than **63 percent** of their expenditures to instruction.
- The DCPS average per-pupil expenditure was about $7,300 in fiscal year 1996, higher than the national average for almost all big cities. D.C. "center city" Catholic schools educate their students at a cost of about $2,700 per pupil.[12] (See Chart 11.) Overall, educating a student at 88 private schools in the District (including both sectarian and nonsectarian schools) costs less than $4,000 a year; at 65, it costs less than $3,200.
- Despite high funding levels per student, a D.C. Financial Control Board survey found that **12 percent** of D.C. public school classrooms did not have textbooks at the beginning of the 1996–1997 school year, and **20 percent** did not have adequate supplies.[13]

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10 See Nina H. Shokraii, "Why Catholic Schools Spell Success for America's Inner-City Children," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1128, June 30, 1997.

11 Interview with Vincent Clark, Catholic Archdiocese of Greater Metropolitan Washington. The Archdiocese received these numbers from its 16 "center city" Catholic schools for the 1996–1997 school year.

12 This number reflects the actual cost to the school system for the 1995–1996 school year, not the tuition rate charged per pupil.

13 Strauss and Horwitz, "Students Caught in a Cycle of Failure," *op. cit.*

- After school officials announced over two years ago that they had abolished nearly 180 bureaucratic positions, school records later revealed that they actually had cut only 100 slots—all of them teaching positions.[14]
- In 1996, the federal government revoked $20 million in grants awarded to the system because of gross mismanagement. For example, the District spent $1.6 million on unrelated personnel salaries instead of extra instruction for disadvantaged students, as required by law.
- The DCPS spend $21 million annually to send 1,079 special education students to private schools. This comes to $19,500 per student, a rate that is five times the national average.

QUALITY OF FACILITIES

Waste and inefficiency are widely cited as partly responsible for the city's deteriorating schools. For example:

- According to the Superintendent's Task Force on Education Infrastructure, a comprehensive facilities assessment of 189 school system buildings in 1991 found more than 16,000 physical deficiencies that would cost an estimated $584 million to repair.
- In 1996, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that **91 percent** of D.C. public schools had at least one inadequate building feature and **73 percent** of the District's schools had at least one unsatisfactory environmental condition, including improper lighting, heating, and ventilation. (See Chart 12.) The average age of DCPS buildings is 50 years.[15]
- The GAO also found that **25 percent** of the maintenance budget never left the facilities office.
- In the early 1990s, the D.C. Council allocated $63 million for roof repairs. According to Control Board analysts, only **7 percent** of that money was spent on roof repairs. Much of the remainder was diverted to pay for salaries.[16]

CONCLUSION

The D.C. public school system needs sweeping reform. It is still far from clear, however, that needed reforms will be implemented soon. That is why allowing students from the bottom rung of the ladder to attend private schools, as contemplated by the D.C. Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997 now being considered by Congress, is so necessary. The District's public schools have failed to prepare students for success; the District's private schools offer a less expensive, more effective alternative. Until General Becton is able to bring public schools up to par, children living in the nation's capital should have the choice to attend a school that will provide them with the quality education they deserve, whether that school is public or private.

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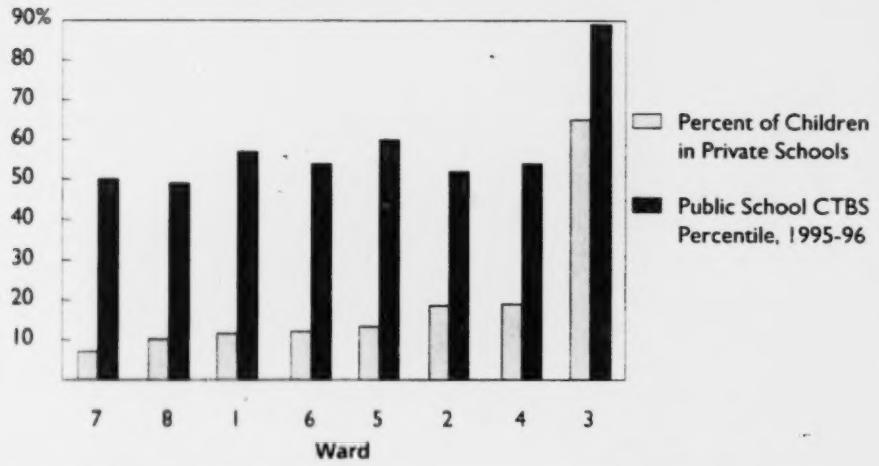
14 Sari Horwitz and Valerie Strauss, "A Well-Financed Failure," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1997, p. A1.

15 U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Facilities: Condition of America's Schools*, GAO/HEHS 95–61, February 1995, p. 37.

16 Michael Powell and Vernon Loeb, "In Lieu of Planning, Patchwork: Students Prepare for the Future in Buildings Bearing Scars of the Past," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1997, p. A1.

Chart 1

DCPS Schools Producing Highest Outcomes in Wards in Which Most Students Attend Private Schools



Note: CTBS is the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. The District has since switched to the Stanford Achievement Test. The latest scores are not yet available by ward.
Source: 1990 U.S. Census; D.C. Office of Planning; DCPSP.

Table 1

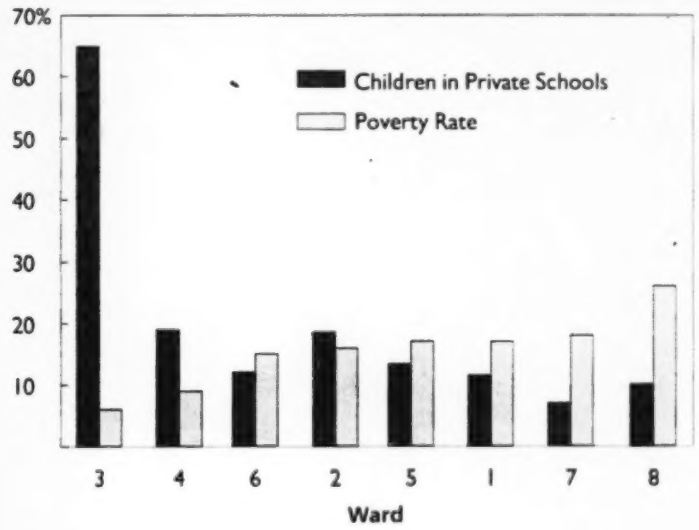
D.C. Private School Attendance, Poverty, and Median Income by Ward

Ward	Children in Private Schools	Poverty Rate	Median Income
1	11.5%	17%	$26,798
2	18.6%	16%	$31,716
3	65.0%	6%	$48,967
4	19.0%	9%	$33,025
5	13.3%	17%	$26,874
6	12.1%	15%	$32,647
7	7.0%	18%	$25,556
8	10.1%	26%	$21,312

Source: 1990 U.S. Census; D.C. Office of Planning; DCPS.

Chart 2

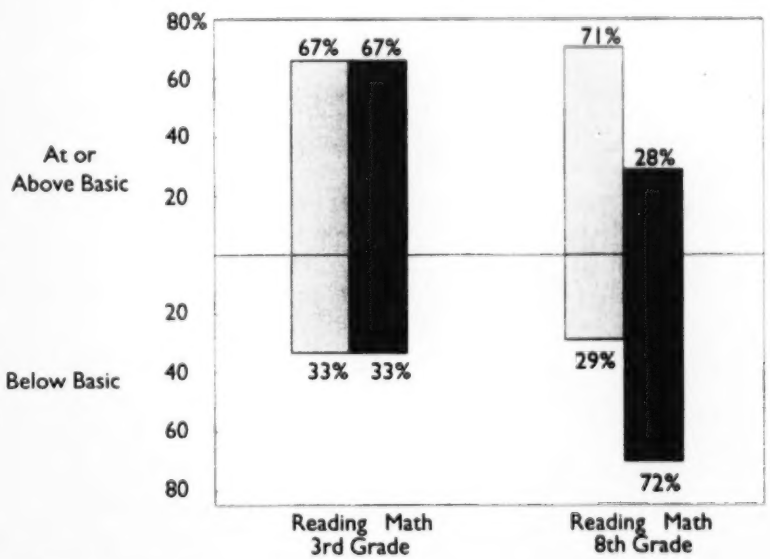
In 1990, Even the Highest Poverty Area in D.C. Had 10 Percent of Students Attending Private Schools



Source: 1990 U.S. Census; D.C. Office of Planning, DCPS

Chart 3

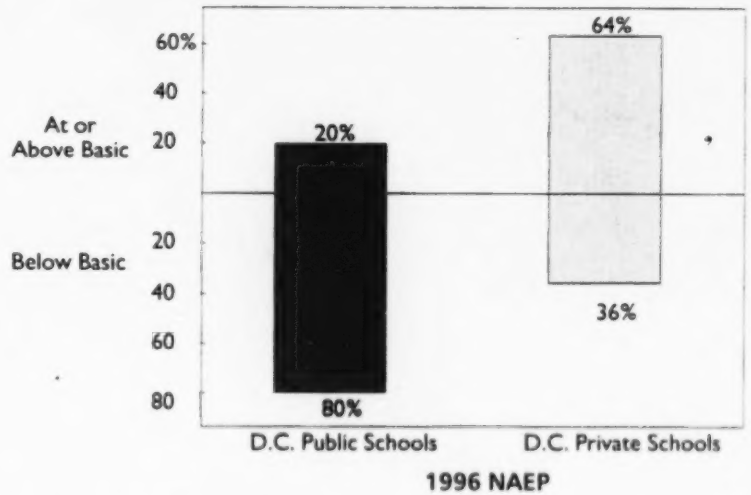
DCPS Students Scoring on Stanford Achievement Test, 1997



Source: D.C. Office of Planning, DCPS.

Chart 4

D.C. Fourth Grade Public School Students Score Significantly Lower Than D.C. Private Students in Math Achievement

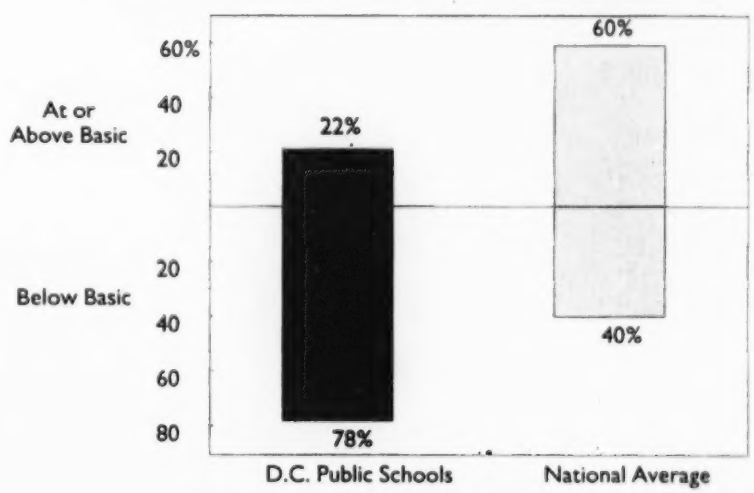


1996 NAEP

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Chart 5

78 Percent of D.C. Fourth Grade Students Score Below Basic Level in Reading Achievement

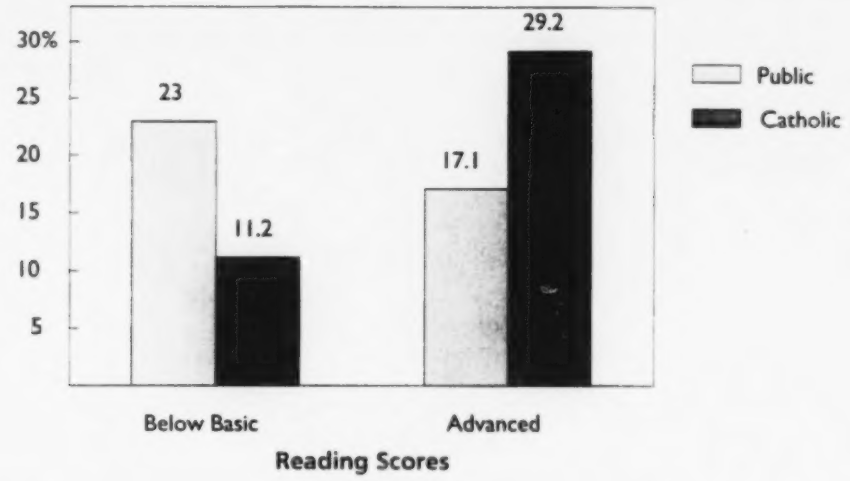


1994 NAEP

Source: DCPS; National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Chart 6

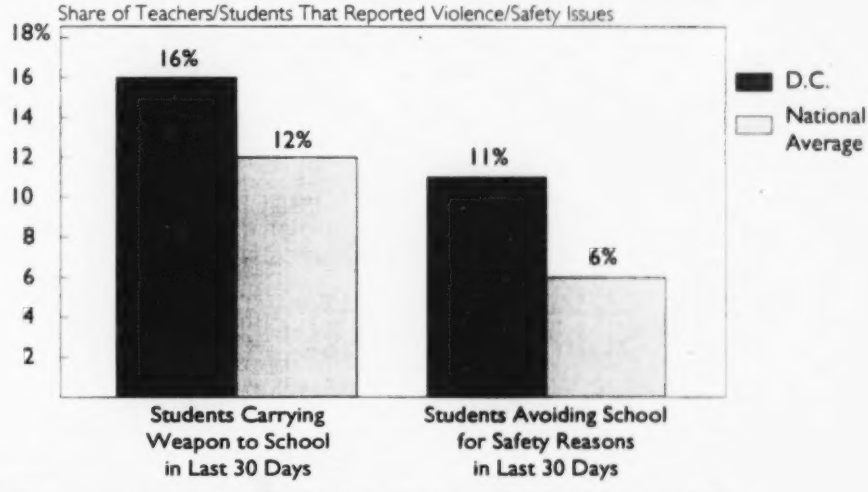
National Comparison: Eighth Graders from the Lowest Socioeconomic Quartile Perform Better in Catholic Schools



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NELS: 88 Student Survey; Penny A. Sebring and Eric M. Camburn, *A Profile of Eighth Graders in Catholic School*, NCEA, 1992.

Chart 7

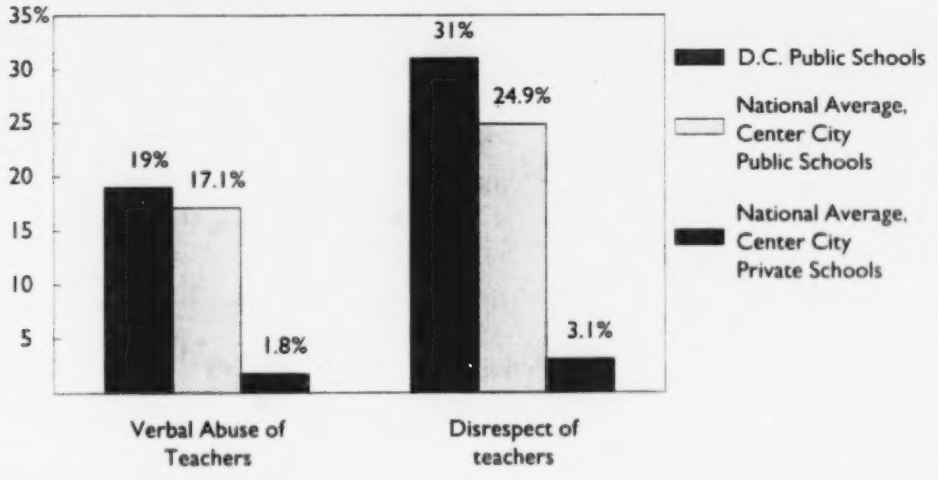
Teachers and Students Report That D.C. Public Schools Are More Dangerous Than the National Average



Sources: Data Volume for the National Education Goals Report (Volume Two: State Data) 1995; The District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority Web site, *http://www.nubian.com/dcfra/newinfo/edreform3.html*.

Chart 8

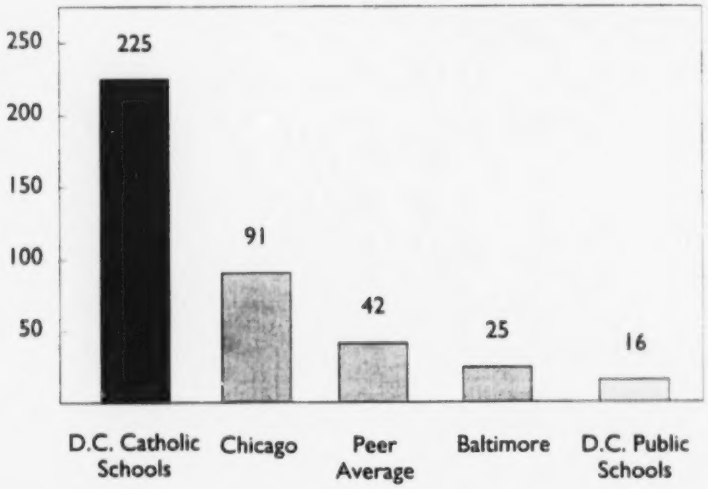
Abuse and Disrespect of Teachers: D.C. Public Schools Compared with National Averages,1993-1994



Note: Figures based on teacher reports.
Source: NCES, *Schools and Staffing the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-1994*

Chart 9

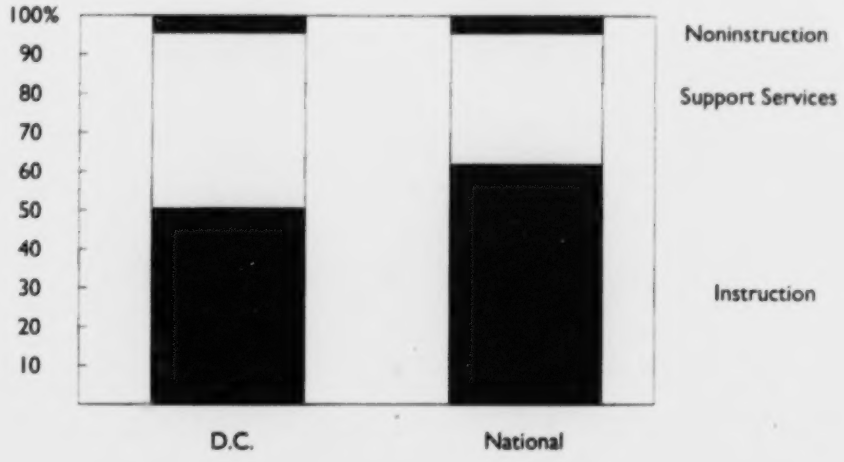
Number of Teachers Per Central Administrator, 1992-1993



Note: Peer Average is the average of cities with similar demographics.
Sources: National Urban Education Goals: 1992-1993 Indicators Report (Council of Great City Schools); Archdiocese of Greater Washington.

Chart 10

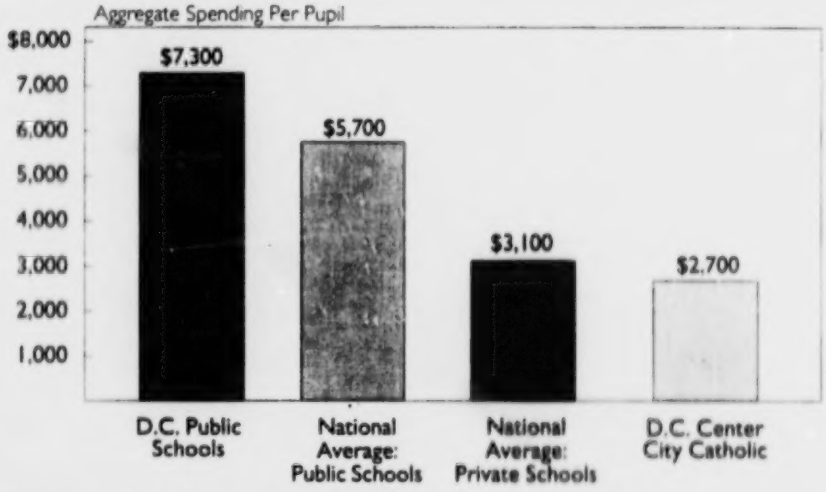
Only Half of the District's Education Expenditures Go Toward Instruction—The National Average Is 63 Percent



Source: *NCES Statistics in Brief: Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 1994-1995*, U.S. Department of Education, June 1997.

Chart 11

In FY 1996, DCPS Spent Almost Three Times as Much Per Student as Center City Catholic Schools

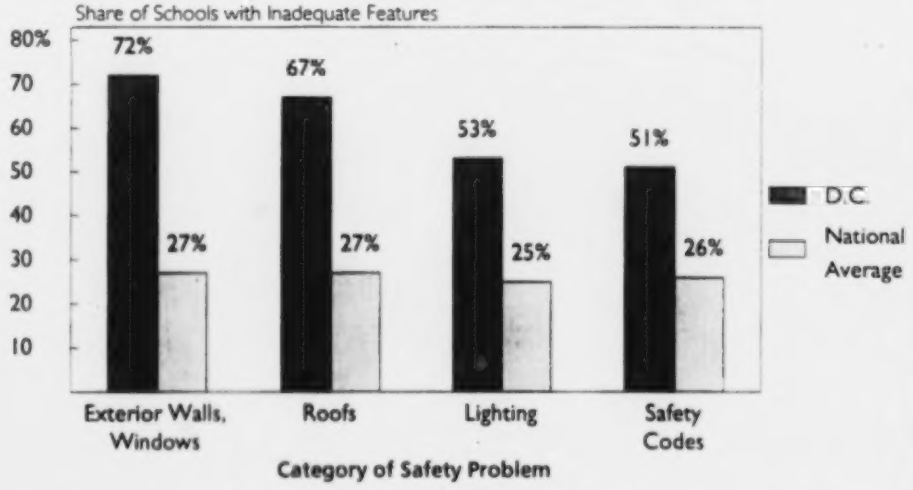


Note: Figures are for total spending per pupil, not tuition.

Sources: DCPS, *FY 1998 Recommended Budget Request*, January 15, 1997; Archdiocese of Greater Washington; *Public and Private Schools — How Do They Differ?* U.S. Department of Education.

Chart 12

D.C. Public Schools Have Two to Three Times as Many Safety Problems Than the National Average



Sources: U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Facilities: Profiles of School Conditions by State*; The District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority Web site, *http://www.nubian.com/dcfra/newinfo/edreform3.html*